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ABSTRACT

Citing the large numbers of disadvantaged black students now being admitted into college in special programs, the author discusses the special counseling needs engendered by their encounter with the institutional demands and alienating effects of the impersonal, white middle-class institution. To assist these students, the counselor must establish a unique relationship with them at a critical moment through an outreach approach. It is anticipated that the counselor will also be called upon to assist the student in the resolution of an identity crisis precipitated by the black student's participation in white institutional life. While not automatically disqualifying white counselors, the author states that they may need to modify their style of counseling from nondirective to open and direct. (TL)

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Counseling Black College Students in Special Programs

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(Abstract)

Large numbers of disadvantaged black students are being admitted into college in special programs in which normal admission requirements are waived. The student's encounter with the institution gives rise to special counseling needs which the present paper describes. In effect, the counselor's task is to assist the student cope with institutional demands and overcome the alienating effect of the impersonal, white, middle-class institution. To do this, the counselor must establish a unique relationship with the student at a critical moment through an outreach approach. Subsequently, the counselor will also be called upon to assist the student in the resolution of an identity crisis. White counselors are not disqualified but they may need to modify their style of counseling.

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Counseling Black College Students in Special Programs

Increasing numbers of disadvantaged students, most of whom are black, are being admitted into college in circumstances where normal admission requirements are waived. The New York State Program SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge) was established in 1967 to work with such students and from the beginning has stressed the need for effective counseling. The nature of such counseling, however, has never been adequately defined and traditional counseling approaches have seldom proved appropriate for the population in question. The present paper has evolved from on-the-job observations interpreted according to some principles of social psychology.

The Academic Environment

The regular student entering college at first will tend to generalize his high school experience to the college situation. When his expectations regarding the academic process and his role as a college student are not realized, he has the resources needed to make appropriate adjustments and, in effect, develop a new frame of reference for his subsequent actions. His ability to do this stems from prior experience which has subtly prepared him for what he encounters in college. This is the cultural advantage the white, middle-class student brings with him by virtue of his exposure to a college-oriented environment in which he has undergone what Merton (1957) terms "anticipatory socialization." That is, in daily interaction with parents, peers, and teachers, he has internalized the rudiments of the role he will be expected to play upon entering college.

Not so the disadvantaged black student! And is is worthwhile noting that "disadvantaged" is the appropriate term since, whatever cultural advantages or "overlooked positives" (Riessman, 1965) he may enjoy, they have little relevance to the demands of the academic environment.

Equalizing Resources

Those who have had years to learn its intricacies may not always realize how complex the academic institution is. Its complexity derives from its loose structure aimed at offering a multiplicity of choices to the knowledgeable student. The disadvantaged student, however, lacks the understanding needed to "negotiate the system." Although the institution's intent is to provide the greatest freedom of opportunity to students, its effects are not egalitarian inasmuch as those who benefit most are those who enter the situation with the most resources. As has oft been observed, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

The counselor's function clearly is to equalize the resources the black student needs in order to come to terms with the demands of the academic environment. As Drake (1965) notes, the resources the black lacks are money, education, "contacts," and "know-how." It is the last two, especially "know-how," that the counselor must provide. This is borne out by Gottlieb (1967, p. 116) in his paper entitled, "Poor Youth Want To Be Middle Class But It's Not Easy" in which he points out that social mobility for lower-class youth is not impaired for want of aspiration but rather because the parents "lack the abilities important to facilitate movement into the more advantageous social positions."

Without the necessary know-how the black student will fail to grasp fully the nature of his role. Furthermore, he will be unaware of

the kinds of sanctions the institution employs to enforce its demands since both sanctions and demands are less than explicit in the college setting. Lacking such knowledge, the student may grossly misjudge what professors expect of him and prove inept in what has been cynically termed "playing the game." This is particularly important since professors possess considerable power, not being subject to as much administrative control as are high school teachers.

Some of the "rules of the game" relate to such matters as class attendance and assignments, effective use of study time, and balancing study and leisure time. Again, the student is called upon to contend with institutional "rules" as, for example, procedures for dropping courses, cumulative grade-point averages, academic probation and dismissal, and course requirements for the student's major. Then there are the bureaucratic demands, especially those requiring paperwork as in the case of financial aid or registering for courses.

In addition the student is obliged to learn the "rules" for coping with the great variation and inconsistency among the behaviors of professors and the expectations they will have of students. He will need to develop perceptual skills whereby he quickly grasps what is going on in any class and how he can best adapt to the demands made upon him.

Motivation

By applying and being admitted to a special program, the student evinces a commitment to what Rainwater (1966) calls the life strategy of career success. That is, the student accepts the idea that life can be rewarding and goals can be achieved by observing rules and by making the required effort. Such commitment is tenuous and is subject to assault from the competing survival strategies to which the student

will have been exposed most of his life.

Counselors and others in speaking to the student are often favorably impressed by the intensity with which he expresses his aspirations. If the student later performs badly for no seemingly adequate reason, the counselor may feel he was being "jived." Counselors are led to accept such explanations only because they equate intensity of aspirations with strength of motivation. Such intensity, however, often obscures a frailty endemic among those long exposed to the disabling conditions of poverty. As Haggstrom (1964, p. 216) points out:

> ". . . a poor person may have the necessary sincerity, intention, and skill to embark on a course of action but there is so much unconscious uncertainty about achieving psychological returns through success that the action may never be seriously attempted."

Failure to meet certain institutional demands may constitute a severe setback for the black student. He may be said to lack the psychological resources of the white student who has a well-developed ego-structure founded on a history of prior successes. The result may be the onset of the "alienation syndrome" which Rousseve (1965, p. 396) describes as "intellectual listlessness, . . . overindulgence in social and recreational pursuits, . . . and an underlying attitude of depressive, and at times hostile, defeatism." For example, the student may avoid facing an academic problem by sleeping late and not attending class. Also, he may play cards for long hours, or "rap" with other students rather than deal with ambiguous and uncertain institutional demands. In such circumstances, the counselor needs to be in touch with the student to help him define the nature of the problem confronting him and the means for handling it.

Initial Contact in the Home

The erosion of the student's high aspirations is similar to but not to be confused with something he is likely to experience on first entering college. The student may experience feelings of powerlessness as he is confronted with an impersonal institution over which he seemingly lacks control, which is further compounded by both real and imagined hostility toward him on the part of the white students and faculty. He will come to feel that the institution is meaningless and that he himself is meaningless to the institution.

It is with a view to forestalling such alienation that the counselor can play a vital role. To assist the student with the problems he faces, then, the counselor must establish contact as soon as possible. Furthermore, the impasse must be avoided where, on the one hand, the counselor waits for the student to make use of his services while, on the other hand, the student is unaware of the problems confronting him or the exact nature of the counseling services intended to assist him.

To avoid such an impasse calls for an outreach approach in which contact is made with the student after acceptance into the program and prior to his attendance at the college. This is a critical time when the student will be asking: "What do I do now that I have been accepted?"

The counselor assigned to the student should take the initiative by arranging to visit him in his home at a time when it is feasible to discuss the college program, not only with the student but also with his parents or spouse. Because the counselor appears on the scene at this moment, his relevance to the student's individual needs is greatly enhanced, the more so since the counselor's identity will be uncompromised by the impersonal quality of the institutional setting.

This outreach approach also takes into account the important part played by parents or spouse in sustaining the student's motivation. Through the person of the counselor the college assumes some relevance to them, too. Because they have the opportunity to be more personally involved, they are less likely to experience resentment vis-à-vis the otherwise alien and impersonal institution. This is important since the student is often forced to bear the brunt of such resentment, such that the eroding effects on him then will have implications for his academic performance.

The initial contact made with the counselor establishes him clearly as the one to whom the student can turn when confronted by the uncertainty and ambiguity of the institutional demands. Indeed, some limited evidence has demonstrated the beneficial effects of home visits. In a research design where academic ability was controlled, students who had been visited in their home before starting classes showed significantly greater academic performance than those who were visited after or not at all (Haettenschwiller, 1969).

Role Definition Through the Home Visit

Although the counselor is interested in making known to the student some of the demands of the academic institution and the services he provides for dealing with these, the visit also provides the occasion to define the broader reaches of his counseling role. In this regard the counselor should forewarn the student of stresses he may experience and that dealing with these is very much part of the counselor's role.

Thomas, Polansky, and Kounin (1955) point out that the "helping person" must be perceived as both competent to help and wanting to help. To do this the counselor must be perceived, not as an arm of the

administration, but as a person squarely on the student's side in his efforts to cope with the demands of the academic institution. A "disidentification" from the administration occurs when the counselor divests himself of the discrediting features of the institutional setting -- office, desk, secretary, and other students waiting to see their counselor. Instead, the home visit affords the occasion "in which the things seen, heard, and experienced in their immediacy are labeled and put into words by the counselor and the client as part of in situ counseling" (Gordon, 1968, p. 130).

The particular nature of the population discussed here calls for a stronger commitment to the student than otherwise would be expected. This means that the counselor may need to be available other than during regular office hours. He should let the student know that he can be reached by telephone at home if need be. Such calls as he receives are seldom likely to make any serious demands on his time and instead can be the occasion for scheduling an office appointment for the next day. At the same time, the reassurance the student gets from such a brief contact may do much at a later time to provide the basis for a good counseling relationship.

Black Life Style and Identity

Although the student is faced with problems which arise from coming to terms with the demands of the academic environment, he may also experience tension in the process of what may be described as coming to terms with himself. For the black student tensions may arise out of unique circumstances and will call for the full range of the counselor's professional capacities.

These tensions relate to the student's life style. In the course of growing up as a member of a subculture, he develops styles of dress and speech as well as modes of responding to situations which are

different from those of the dominant culture. His life style is part of his identity continuously assuring him of meaningful relationships with others. On campus he may find that his identity and life style no longer guarantee him the rewarding relationships he has known. Indeed, in the classroom he may find that his identity as a student in a special program may further provoke ambiguous and sometimes demeaning responses from both students and professors.

Is he, then, to change his life style and thereby reject or compromise his identity? Is any change in life style which almost inevitably follows upon encounter with new educational experiences only evidence to others that he has been "co-opted" by the white, middle-class institution? As Shibutani (1955, p. 564) points out:

> ". . . all forms of social mobility, from sudden conversion to gradual assimilation, may be regarded as displacements of reference groups, for they involve a loss of responsiveness to the demands of one social world and the adoption of the perspective of another."

Change in perspective may entail some change in life style and, as Henderson (1967) notes, a person's effort to function as a member of a group other than his own may give rise to adjustment problems. Clearly, the counselor has an important part to play in bringing such feelings of conflict and ambivalence to the level of consciousness. Resolution of these is essential if the student is to "move across cultural boundaries" (Peterson, 1965, p. 1001).

In coming to terms with himself, the student will begin to shape a new identity without necessarily surrendering the old and well-defined one. Instead, the emerging identity will engender some stress as the

effort is made to synthesize both the old and the new identity.

This identity crisis will be manifested in deteriorating relations with family and friends, in conflicts with professors, and in perceived racism on the part of white students. The counselor's part will be to permit the student to ventilate his feelings, to enable him to verbalize the dimension of the conflict, and to facilitate a resolution of the problem. Where the counselor communicates a continuing awareness of the culture from which the student's identity derives, he is in a position to assist the student in working through the resolution of the identity crisis.

Black Dependency in Counseling

The counseling relationship is always vulnerable to becoming a dependency relationship. While undesirable in all cases, for black students there is added possibility that it will activate feelings of inadequacy vis-à-vis the white institution. To guard against this, the counselor should adopt a style which is open and direct. Some may find this a far cry from the nondirective techniques advocated by counselor training institutions. The population for whom these techniques were developed, however, was one whose prior experience provided a substantial basis for the counseling relationship.

Nondirective techniques are inappropriate for the population discussed here since they serve only to signal an ambiguous and threatening relationship (Bernstein, 1964). It is far more important that the counselor "level" with the student and this on occasion may call for the use of "high impact" words.

Simply put, the counselor's style should reflect acceptance and genuineness. It would be a mistake, however, to regard these as

cross-cultural imperatives. Insofar as they are necessary ingredients of the counseling relationship, they must be interpreted in terms of the student's culture and not in terms of white, middle-class culture.

Ultimately, the occasion may present itself where counseling will entail an expression of more personal ideas and feeling. This certainly will hold true as the student begins to shape an increasingly personal identity. Indeed, a personal identity as opposed to a social identity will inevitably be one outcome of his encounter with the academic experience (Rousseve, 1970). With the emergence of a personal identity he will shed some restraints and acquire greater flexibility and power.

The counselor can play a vital part in facilitating this transformation. It should not be assumed, however, that others who have the inherent potential to establish a "good relationship" can accomplish this task. Despite important differences, the professionally-trained counselor alone is equipped to realize fully the goals of counseling.

Black and White Counselors

Further, there is no reason to believe that white counselors are automatically disqualified. Inasmuch as enabling the student to acquire know-how in negotiating the system is of primary concern, it is easily understood here that job competence transcends race (Henderson, 1965).

Nevertheless, as noted already, style plays a part in how the counselor goes about his job. For the white counselor, however, his style must also reflect an outgoing acceptance of the other's blackness instead of the tacit avoidance which has been all too prevalent in the past. At the same time the counselor must accept fully his own whiteness since an apologetic or uncertain air often signals an unconscious racism. Only with both participants secure in their positions can

progress be made toward an effective counseling relationship.

Clearly, there are those who believe only blacks should counsel blacks. If, however, the goal of the black student beyond college is to obtain a "piece of the action" presently dominated by whites, then he must develop his identity in interaction with both blacks and whites, and this includes counselors. Where conditions permit, however, it is preferable that the white counselor work in a predominantly black counseling component headed by a black supervisor. Such contextual factors impinge on the nature of the relationship the white counselor will have with the black student.

Finally, practical reasons also dictate the use of white counselors. At present there are too few black counselors to provide the professional services so badly needed.

For black counselors, a different problem exists. Students may see them as "oreos" who have been "co-opted" by the white institution. Ultimately, their success rests on their ability to communicate their common concern and on their ability to counsel wisely.

Conclusion

Fundamental to the counseling of black college students in special programs is the establishing of early contact. The relationship in its initial stage must be founded upon clearly perceived returns by the student. These will lay the groundwork for subsequent meaningful counseling.

It would be a mistake to think some of the problems discussed relate only to disadvantaged blacks. Inability to negotiate the system has also been the condition of the lower class. For blacks, however,

there is the added dimension which casts the matter in a substantially different light.

In the past, counseling of the disadvantaged or the culturally different, both black and white, has proven largely ineffective. Hopefully, then, knowledge gained from new approaches as outlined in this paper may well foreshadow the emergence of a more comprehensive and effective counseling model.

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